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9 Ways to Boost Your Chances of Promotion in Academia

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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

9 ways to boost your chances of promotion in academia

16 April 2015 | By Richard J. Williams

'Academic citizenship' is the key to moving up the career ladder, argues Richard J. Williams



Source: David Humphries

The academic business is a peculiar one, never more so than when it comes to seeking promotion. For people from the so-called real world, the process must seem like *The Lord of the Rings*: an epic quest, at glacial speeds, for uncertain ends. Those of us on the inside know that it is, if anything, even worse. But bizarre as the process may seem, it does actually permit career advancement.

The key is “[academic citizenship](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/is-academic-citizenship-under-strain/2018134.article) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/is-academic-citizenship-under-strain/2018134.article>)” – a set of fuzzy rights and responsibilities that are nowhere written down. And to make citizenship work for you, you need the pragmatic acceptance that universities are organisations like any other. This means that they pay individuals money, in return for which they expect those individuals from time to time to help with the housekeeping. This arrangement will be familiar to non-academics. It is called work.

There’s a popular view that you get promoted for research alone. But in my reasonably wide experience, I can think of just one academic colleague promoted solely on grounds of research. The rest were promoted for various forms of alchemy, but in large part they’d proved themselves as heads of department, directors of student organisations, directors of research and so on. They had, in other words, proved themselves as citizens.

Of course, citizenship has its rules, which vary according to where and how they arise. But I doubt they vary all that much. Here are mine:

1. Learn the language. Look in the mirror and say the word “citizenship” to yourself. If you can do this without sneering, you are on your way. If you can’t (and at first, most academics can’t), you must practise until you can.
2. Guess what the vice-chancellor is thinking. This is surprisingly easy. Remember the university’s annual report? Get it out of the bin, make a cup of coffee – and read it.
3. Find something in the report that you can plausibly do (paraphrasing JFK’s January 1961 address may help: “Ask not what the university can do for you, but what you can do for the university...”). Again, this is surprisingly easy. If the report puts international recruitment at the top of the list for the year, it may not be a bad idea to develop an interest in the Singaporean school system. By the same token, if the report makes clear that the university has lost interest in master’s programmes, don’t, whatever you do, base a promotion campaign around your new MSc.
4. Make life simpler. You have probably spent your life doing the opposite, because good research thrives on nuance and difference. Well, now’s the time to cease those baroque tendencies. Nobody will be unhappy if you cancel a meeting, and if you can routinely get people out of meetings, your colleagues will love you. (There will be hollow laughter from some of my colleagues here. But I remember the delight when we abolished half our standing postgraduate committees.)
5. Know how stuff works. For humanities academics this is counter-intuitive, less so in other areas. It’s still good advice. The “stuff” might be a photocopier (you should see me de-jam a Xerox 5765 – I am fast). Or it could be the committee structure of the HR department. Whatever it is, have a quiet specialism. This is the soft diplomacy of promotions campaigns, the equivalent of the ballet troupes a nation might send in advance of the gun-boats. In an organisation of 50,000 people, all at any one time looking for solutions to problems, practical knowledge goes a long way.
6. Be around. Your pathological horror of the workplace can be resumed as soon as the promotions case is over, but during that period, you should be relentless in your pursuit of lunch and coffee companions. Your door, needless to say, is wedged open.
7. Be nice to administrators. They mediate all information flows in the university, including everything concerned with your advancement. They need your respect. They are generally more fun than academics, in any case, and they can show you neat tricks, like how to fix a Xerox 5765 with a spoon.
8. Be nice to the university. If you have the urge to diss your institution in public, at least don’t do it while making a promotion case. If your urges are strong, redirect them. Edinburgh City Council is the long-suffering recipient of my redirected rage, although in my defence I would say it fully deserves it.
9. Finally, enjoy the jobs pages. Embrace citizenship and you find yourself for the first time in your life in a job market. You may not have heard of this. It is a place where jobs that you can do are advertised more than once every 10 years. You can even apply for them!



(URL=<http://www.tsishop.co.uk/thed->

[ts/THEDOA74/?utm_source=THE&utm_medium=Comment&utm_content=THEDOA74&utm_campaign=freetrial](http://www.tsishop.co.uk/thed-))

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Author:

Richard J. Williams is professor of contemporary visual cultures at the University of Edinburgh. He lurks in the background at [thenewmetropolitan.com](http://www.thenewmetropolitan.com/) (URL=<http://www.thenewmetropolitan.com/>), a web magazine about urban citizenship.

Readers' comments (3)

- [Lisa Öberg](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/lisa-berg/2052014.publicprofile) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/lisa-berg/2052014.publicprofile>) | 16 Apr 2015 5:11pm

Fun, but too cynical for me.



- [Paul Carder](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/paul-carder/2035968.publicprofile) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/paul-carder/2035968.publicprofile>) | 16 Apr 2015 6:57pm

Good advice for any organisation, in my experience. But as one new to academia, useful, thanks. Learning that 'nothing is written down anywhere' is a good point, and one I learned in this, my first, year. Having worked for several business organisations, very large and some small, I have not yet worked out why so many academics whinge about their jobs - we're doing what we want to do after all? If you're not, you can get paid a lot more to be unhappy in the commercial world :)



- [olauduku](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/olauduku/483057.publicprofile) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/olauduku/483057.publicprofile>) | 17 Apr 2015 1:52pm

all the mentorship I could ever need- thanks Richard!